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WELCOME TO UTD

Twenty-one arrested after administration calls in law enforcement to destroy peaceful pro-Palestine encampment, claiming policy violations

SECTION A: GOVERNING PRINCIPLES	SECTION B: PROHIBITED EXPRESSION	SECTION C: GENERAL RULES ON EXPRESSION	SECTION C: GENERAL RULES ON EXPRESSION
Subsection 1.1: Freedom of Speech, Expression, Assembly	Subsection 7.3: Harassment	Subsection 10: Disruption	Subsection 13: Other Rules with Incidental Effects
The freedoms of speech, expression and assembly are <i>fundamental rights of all persons</i> and are <i>central to the mission of the University</i> . Students, faculty and staff have the right to assemble, to speak, and to attempt to attract the attention of others, and corresponding rights to hear the speech of others when they choose to listen and to ignore the speech of others when they . . .	To make an argument for or against the substance of any political, religious, philosophical, ideological, or academic idea is <i>not harassment, even if some listeners are offended</i> by the argument or idea. The categories of sexually harassing speech set forth in UT-DBP3102 of the UT Dallas Handbook of Operating Procedures are rarely, if ever, necessary to argue . . .	No speech, expression, or assembly <i>may</i> be conducted in a way that disrupts or interferes with any: (1) teaching, research, administration, or other authorized activities on the campus; (2) free and unimpeded flow of pedestrian and vehicular traffic on the campus; or (3) signs, tables, exhibits, public assemblies, distribution of . . .	<i>Reasonable and nondiscriminatory</i> rules of this kind generally control over the rights of free speech guaranteed in this policy. But even these kinds of rules are subject to the <i>constitutional right</i> of free speech. Such rules must be <i>viewpoint neutral</i> . Such rules <i>cannot</i> regulate speech more restrictively than they regulate other activities that cause the problems to be avoided . . .

STUDENTS SPEAK, ADMIN SILENCES

For further questions on UTD's free expression policies, contact:

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NOT HERE!' 'THERE IS NO RIOT HERE!' 'THERE IS NO

'WHY ARE Y

An overview of the 72 hours when students fo

THIS IS NO RIOT HERE!' 'THERE IS NO RIOT HERE!' 'THE

MAY 1

Read in a zig-zag pattern from left to right.

4:30 A.M.

Pro-Palestine activists begin constructing the “Gaza Liberation Plaza” encampment in Chess Plaza.

11 A.M. to 2 P.M.

Encampment attendees participate in reading circles, chants and prayers.

3:45 P.M.

Protest leaders read a letter from UTD administration out loud, which says encampments and barricades are not permitted on campus.

4 P.M.

Law enforcement begins tearing down the encampment and arresting protesters.

6 A.M.

UTD administration discovers the encampment when Vice President Rafael Martín visits the Chess Plaza.

2:40 P.M.

The Mercury receives initial reports of state troopers' presence on campus.

6 P.M.

Encampment attendees relocate to the Plinth.

Despite admin's silence

Community supports 21 arrested at "Gaza Liberation Plaza"

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Opinion Editor

In a historic first, UTD administration called in law enforcement with riot gear to destroy the “Gaza Liberation Plaza” encampment while arresting 21 students, faculty, alumni and community members. Despite outcry across the UTD community, administration has not responded to demands to drop legal charges and disciplinary action against those arrested.

Students for Justice in Palestine members established the “Gaza Liberation Plaza” at 4:30 a.m. May 1 in Chess Plaza to make three key demands. Those demands are that UTD divest from weapons manufacturers that support Israel, officially support a permanent cease-fire in Gaza and reject Gov. Greg Abbott’s executive order GA-44, which singles out groups like SJP for “antisemitic speech and acts.” Less than 12 hours later, law enforcement arrived on campus with riot gear and armored vehicles, destroying the encampment and arresting 21 students, faculty, alumni and community members for criminal trespass. UTD students and local community members protested outside Collin County Jail, where the 21 individuals were detained, until every person was released on bond by 4:30 p.m. the next day. Student activists, faculty, alumni and

community organizations have since condemned UTD's decision to deploy law enforcement to dismantle the peaceful encampment and demanded UTD not penalize any individuals arrested.

The encampment was barricaded with tires, plywood and cardboard and housed tents, food and water supplies and a makeshift community library. Throughout the morning of May 1, encampment attendees participated in reading circles, chants, painting and prayers, with over 100 protesters in attendance by noon and 200 by 6 p.m. At 2:40 p.m., *The Mercury* received initial reports of state troopers' presence on campus. At 3:45 p.m., encampment leaders read aloud a notice issued by UTD, which mandated the encampment be taken down immediately, but did not require protesters to disperse.

"The setting up of an encampment including tents, barricades and other structures is not permitted under the university's policy

for speech, expression, and assembly, nor is it permitted under any other University of Texas at Dallas or UT System policy or rule,” the notice said. “This is written notice that all tents and structures must be removed immediately. Failure to comply with this instruction may result in removal for criminal trespass or other violations of state law and or sanctions under the Student Code of Conduct as appropriate.”

At 4 p.m., over 60 officers from UTDPD, Texas DPS, Texas Marshals, Richardson PD and the Collin County Sheriff's Office arrived at the encampment in over 30 police vehicles, tearing down the encampment and arresting protesters. Officers restrained individuals with wire handcuffs and chains. By 5:40 p.m., a police vehicle and 16 officers with grenade launchers advanced on the destroyed encampment, after which encampment attendees left Chess Plaza and relocated to the Plinth, where the protest continued. Law enforcement arrested a total of 21 individuals including Associate

SJP President Mousa Najjar and SJP Secretary Nour Saad, alongside seven other students, one UTD alum and eight community members.

"I was struck, as [law enforcement] was advancing, that they were not there to talk, they were not there to de-escalate, they were not there to do anything other than to arrest people and to destroy," Wright said.

After the notice was read aloud, Wright said he felt surprised administration did not provide students time to leave or negotiate, and that the policies referenced in the notice were unclear and unnamed.

By 7 p.m., the Plinth demonstration dispersed with attendees relocating to Collin County Jail, where the detainees were held despite the encampment falling within Dallas County's legal jurisdiction on campus. Throughout the entire night, over 150 protest-

ers outside the jail chanted, prayed and demanded the immediate release of all detainees. By 9 a.m. May 2, 50 protesters remained, including detainees' family members. Alibhai, the first detainee to be released, exited the jail at 11:40 a.m. and the final detainee was released at 4:30 p.m.

Marwa Elbially, a volunteer attorney present at the jail demonstration, said individuals arrested for misdemeanors can typically be freed a few hours after their arrest through attorney appearance bonds. However, Collin County Magistrate Lisa Bronchetti issued a standing order preventing appearance bonds for criminal trespass — which the 21 arrested demonstrators were being charged with. Without the appearance bond, those arrested would only be released after their arraignment, which could happen as late as 72 hours after arrest. Wright said those arrested faced differing treatment from officials depending on their perceived religion or ethnicity.

“Our students wearing more Middle Eastern clothes or those with common Muslim names were asked far more difficult and probing questions [by the judge overseeing arraignment], and often were only given bond after paying \$3,000,” Wright said. “Other students, and myself, were asked only two simple questions and released on a PR bond without having to pay a fee.”

A personal recognizance bond, or PR bond, allows individuals charged with a crime to leave jail without paying collateral, usually because of the connection the individual has with the local community. A typical bond requires payment to ensure the charged individual appears at their hearing. Bond money for those that required collateral was supplied by the Palestine Youth Movement.

"It was interesting to see the amount of bond the judge was placing on everybody," Alibhai said. "While I don't have that legal

RIOT HERE!' 'THERE IS NO RIOT HERE!' 'THERE IS NO

YOU IN RIOT GEAR?

formed a pro-Palestine encampment and law enforcement attacked, arrested attendees

ERE IS NO RIOT HERE!' 'THERE IS NO RIOT HERE!' 'TH

MAY 2

MAY 3



9:30 A.M.

Arraignment begins for the 21 arrested individuals; roughly 50 protesters remain outside the jail.

11:40 A.M.

The first detainee, UTD professor Ali Asgar Alibhai, is released from jail.



2 P.M.

Pro-Palestine activists protest the arrests at Chess Plaza; another encampment is not constructed.

NOW

UTD alumni, faculty members, Student Government and the Islamic Association of North Texas, among other groups, issue letters expressing solidarity with those arrested.

7 P.M.

Protests begin outside the Collin County Jail, peaking with roughly 150 students and community members in attendance.



4:30 P.M.

The final detainee is released from jail, almost 24 hours after the initial arrest.

TIMELINE BY ANIKA SULTANA | GRAPHICS EDITOR
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ANIKA SULTANA | MERCURY STAFF

placing on everybody,” Alibhai said. “While I don’t have that legal expertise, I found the amounts being placed for bonds were huge and I don’t know how people could ever pay this back. And of course, if you don’t pay your bond then you have to go back into the system. What kind of system is that, where if you have more money you get to stay in luxury?”

While held inside the jail, encampment detainees bonded with other inmates by engaging in academic conversations and discussing the inherent issues of the U.S. prison system. Officers refused to tell the detainees what time it was, according to Alibhai, on top of other harsh treatments and conditions like “freezing” jail cells and insufficient space for all the inmates to sleep. Alibhai said some jail staff were compassionate and kind, such as one officer who helped hijabi detainees cover their hair after having their hijabs seized during arrest.

“They do try to instill that fear into you since there is no clock, they try to turn you against the other inmates and separate you,” Alibhai said. “This lady [who helped provide hijabs] was nice and cognizant of us, but not everyone we dealt with was so nice. While some of the officers humanized us, others went out of their way to dehumanize us too.”

All 21 detainees are being charged with a Class B Criminal Trespass misdemeanor, punishable with a fine up to \$2,000 or up to a 180-day jail sentence. Wright said arrested faculty’s release conditions state they can only be present on campus for “teaching classes and job-related activities.” Wright said that since the detainees’ release, UTDPD has been stricter than what the release conditions stipulate — for instance, UTDPD required that Admiral be escorted to and from her office. Wright said students have faced harassment since their return from Collin County Jail.

“I have a lot of students who I know would love it if I could attend their graduation, but the ambiguity of my bond puts me in a difficult situation,” Wright said. “It is hard to know how to celebrate in a moment which feels so sad.”

After the arrests, multiple groups published letters in solidarity with those arrested. The SG Executive Committee, along with nine previous presidents and vice presidents, signed a letter May 2 demanding UTD drop all charges against arrested students and faculty and pursue no disciplinary action. As of May 15, over 100 faculty have signed an open letter with identical demands, which was blocked from mass-email circulation by UTD President Richard Benson. A letter signed by over 1,300 alumni May 3 echoes these demands and affirms the encampment protesters’ call for UTD to divest from Israel-backing military companies, reject GA-44 and support a permanent cease-fire in Gaza. The Islamic Association of North Texas and North Texas Islamic Council, along with 27 other community organizations and businesses, addressed a letter to UTD administration and city leaders May 3 demanding answers to questions, such as why Allen PD was involved in the encampment raid, why Bronchetti blocked appearance bonds without a written copy of the order and how state law enforcement will ensure students can “protest without fear of a militarized police response.”

“Our trust in Dr. Benson’s leadership and his ability to safeguard our students has eroded,” the IANT and NTIC letter said. “For the Islamic Association of North Texas in particular, this incident brought forth painful memories of when radical right-wing groups were protesting IANT, and when our community’s children were forced to walk to school between rows of right-wing protestors armed with AR-15s ... Armed protestors threatening children outside of IANT were afforded more protection than students protesting peacefully on their own campus.”

At 8 p.m. May 1, Benson released a schoolwide email that said the encampment was removed for “[violating] institutional rules” about barricades and structures on campus, and that UTD “will continue to be a strong advocate for ... free speech.” On May 9, Benson published an op-ed in *The Dallas Morning News* where he said no one was arrested for protesting, only for noncompliance with the university order to dismantle the encampment and leave.

“Regrettably, the encampment on May 1 differed from all of the protests that came before and after, thus prompting the university’s response,” Benson said in the op-ed. “Such an encampment constructed under the cover of night at the center of our campus, impeding faculty, staff and students from their daily tasks, is not protected by the First Amendment or our speech and assembly policies.”

On May 10, UTD’s Academic Senate convened an emergency meeting to discuss administration’s response to the encampment. Wright and Alibhai spoke at the meeting, while Admiral was absent attending a Fulbright program outside of the country. At the

meeting, Wright — who was briefly present at the encampment May 1 — said it was still possible to navigate around the barricades with a 30-second detour. Wright and Alibhai spoke about their experiences and urged the senate to pass a resolution in solidarity with those arrested. Michael Kesden, associate professor of physics and speaker-elect of the Academic Senate, said administration became aware of the encampment around 6 a.m. May 1, when Vice President Rafael Martín visited it. Ravi Prakash, computer science professor and speaker of the Academic Senate, said Benson confirmed in a private meeting that no weapons were present at the encampment, nor were demonstrators violent. The Academic Senate passed a motion urging Benson to drop the charges and refrain from punishing the students and faculty.

“When I woke Wednesday and learned of the encampment, I raced to campus worried for these students,” Wright said at the senate meeting. “My fears were almost immediately assuaged. I found an impressive level of calm, commitment and organization — teams of legal observers, attorneys, and medical personnel were present and eager to exercise their rights within the great American tradition of peaceful civil disobedience. [The encampment] was the work of some of our brightest and most committed students.”

Wright and Alibhai both said they felt compelled to stand between the students at the encampment and advancing law enforcement. Both Wright and Alibhai said they hoped faculty’s presence would help de-escalate the situation.

“I just got there, and I thought that I was in some sort of movie or war zone,” Alibhai said at the senate meeting. “Everyone around me was chanting ... They kept on saying, ‘There is no riot here, why are you in riot gear?’ With all the noise and commotion, I had this gut feeling that someone is going to get hurt. Someone is going to get killed.”

It is currently unclear who within UTD’s administration organized law enforcement’s arrival at the encampment. At the time of publication, *The Mercury* has not received a response from the Office of the President.

The Chess Plaza arrests came two days after state troopers arrested 79 protesters at an encampment in UT Austin’s South Lawn and on the same day NYPD arrested 100 protesters occupying Columbia University’s Hamilton Hall. The encampment was the climax of a series of demonstrations from SJP — such as April 25’s sit-in at the Administration Building — which aimed to compel UTD administration to divest and support a cease-fire, and one of many pro-Palestine demonstrations that have occurred worldwide since Oct. 7.

“We should always tell our students that they are safe here to express their ideas, and I feel that that all changed on May 1,” Alibhai said. “I rushed to try and protect my students because my students and my colleagues are my strength, and even after this, I ironically still love UTD. I hope that we can learn from this and grow as an institution.”



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Comets create encampment in solidarity with Gaza

UTD joins pro-Palestine college demonstrations nationwide as students establish a solidarity plaza overnight

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Students established a solidarity encampment with Gaza at the Chess Plaza, surrounded by walls made of cardboard, plywood and tires with a sign reading “Free Palestine: all the walls will fall.” State and local police forces arrived 4 p.m., tearing down the encampment and arresting at least 16 students and three professors less than 12 hours after the encampment’s creation.

At 4:30 a.m. May 1, UTD students created the “Gaza Liberation Plaza” encampment, joining at least 13 other universities nationwide with similar demonstrations as the first encampment in north Texas. According to an Instagram post by UTD’s Students for Justice in Palestine, the encampment’s goal was to “escalate and put pressure on our university until UTD/UTIMCO divest from war profiteers and Palestine is free.” The encampment comes in the wake of last week’s protests on campus, which consisted of a walkout and sit-in beginning April 23 and culminating in the rejection of a meeting with UTD President Richard Benson April 26.

At 7:00 a.m., a post from SJP provided community guidelines for the event, which instructed attendees to not engage with counter-protesters. The guidelines also prohibited littering and vandalism, drug use, sharing personal information and “any forms of hate or bigotry.”

At 11:40 a.m., around 100 protesters were inside the encampment, which spanned the width of the Chess Plaza and blocked pedestrian access through the area. While the encampment was open to all, SJP representatives told members of *The Mercury* that reporters were not allowed inside the space and provided a blue tent nearby for the media.

SJP issued three demands: first, that UTD divest from Raytheon, Lockheed Martin, General Dynamics, Northrop Gruman and Boeing — military contractors that supply arms to Israel. Second, that UTD officially reject GA-44, an executive order passed by Gov. Greg Abbott which singles out groups like SJP as deserving punishment, which the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression described as an act of censorship. Third, that UTD release an official statement calling for an “immediate, permanent cease-fire” in Gaza.

Imam Omar Suleiman — a prominent pro-Palestine activist and religious leader — appeared at the encampment to lead Fajr at 5:25 a.m., the first prayer of the day for Muslims. Suleiman guided the protesters through a song, which when translated into English means, “We will stay here until the pain goes away; we will live here, and the rhythm will change.” As part of his



SHREYA RAVI | MERCURY STAFF

Comets and community members attend the "Gaza Liberation Plaza" encampment in Chess Plaza next to the barricade near SSB.

speech to those gathered for Fajr, Suleiman said that ease comes after suffering, and that now is a time of darkness as activists and the people of Palestine push for their liberation despite how “scary” it may be.

“Knowing that they know that we are with them in solidarity would be enough,” Suleiman said. “If we achieve nothing else beyond giving them a shoulder to cry on or a shoulder to stand on or amplify their voices, then that in and of itself is sufficient and we’re OK with that.”

At 11 a.m., Wright led protesters in a “read-in,” where the group silently read three articles and discussed them, after which another student read a poem. The readings focused on the military-industrial complex’s interaction with academia, the anniversary of the end of apartheid in South Africa and the destruction of archives and museums in Gaza. During the read-in, Wright discussed Palestinian poet and professor Refaat Alareer, who was killed by an Israeli airstrike Dec. 6 and whose poems have been cited extensively by U.S. activists; the small community library Wright set up at the encampment was named after Alareer. Wright said that when political movements occur on campus, faculty have the responsibility to protect students as well as provide “academic context” to current events.

“I was impressed to see so many students silently poring over the readings, carefully discussing these complicated issues, and learning from one another,” Wright said in a statement to *The*

Mercury. “I hope the administration continues to avoid the catastrophic errors made by university administrators elsewhere and protect our students from police violence.”

The University of North Texas is the latest college campus to have major pro-Palestine protests with a few hundred students staging a walkout on April 30, according to NBC 5 Dallas-Fort Worth. “Israel backers” violently attacked UCLA’s encampment May 1, making it the first encampment to experience violence unrelated to law enforcement. Police forcefully dismantled UT Austin’s encampment April 29, arresting at least 40 protesters; between April 29 and 30 over 100 UT Austin protesters were arrested at similar encampments and protests. UTD’s protest, attended by families and community members as well as students and faculty, remained peaceful until the arrival of law enforcement including TDPD, Texas DPS, Texas Marshals, Richardson PD and Collin County PD.

Chief of Police Brent Tourangeau did not respond to requests for comment on how the university will respond to the encampment.

The encampment spread out from Chess Plaza at 4 p.m., moving east as state troopers arrived to barricade the plaza from the west, blocking protesters from leaving the grounds of the original camp. As of 5 p.m., protesters observed two snipers on a nearby building’s rooftop and Richardson Fire Department pickup trucks transported the torn-down encampment’s remnants away from

campus. By 6 p.m, 200 demonstrators remained protesting despite the encampment’s eradication.

Correspondents from CBS, Fox 4, *The Dallas Morning News*, NBC 5 and ABC were present at the scene. NBC 5 sent a news helicopter to the encampment, according to the charted flight path on Flight Radar 24, which was seen overhead since at least 9:50 a.m.

At 8:14 a.m. the International Students and Scholars Office sent an email to international students describing the potential consequences of protesting. The ISSO said that participation in demonstrations which leads to arrest or otherwise interferes with a student’s ability to meet their visa requirements could “impact [their] immigration status and ability to enter and remain in the U.S.”

At 11:15 a.m. SJP shared a private Slack message from Sheila Elliott, director of UTD Emergency Medical Services, in which she said UEMR volunteers “are prohibited from participating in any protest on campus.” In a statement to *The Mercury*, Elliott said all the volunteer EMS providers in UEMR “are required to uphold the Texas Administrative Code, or they can receive disciplinary action and or lose their medical license.” Elliott said the prohibition on participating in campus protests applied to on-duty UEMR volunteers. Elliott said UEMR volunteers were instructed to increase EMR coverage on May 1 in case an escalation at the protest caused a large-scale medical emergency.

Law enforcement raids pro-Palestine encampment, arrests students and faculty

Nine students and three faculty members were among those detained as police tore down the encampment



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Originally published May 1.

Less than 12 hours after pro-Palestine student activists formed the “Gaza Liberation Plaza” encampment in UTD’s Chess Plaza, local police and state troopers stormed the event, dismantling the tents and barricades constructed throughout the day and arresting student and faculty protesters.

At 4:30 a.m., a coalition of student groups including Students for Justice in Palestine, Young Democratic Socialists of America and Rainbow Guard created the UTD Solidarity with Gaza Encampment overnight, inviting students to join them throughout the day. Three UTD professors, nine students, eight community members and one alum were arrested at 4 p.m. UTD is now the second Texas university to have the Texas Department of Public Safety intervene, following the arrests at UT Austin, which led to the detainment of over 100 people.

Reports of state troopers heading to the encampment began at approximately 2:40 p.m. By 4 p.m., law enforcement officials from UTDPD, Texas DPS, Texas Marshals, Richardson PD and Collin County Sheriff’s Office began marching toward the encampment clad in riot gear. Officers used wire handcuffs to bind those arrested. Officers carried riot batons, assault rifles, riot shotguns, gas masks, wire handcuffs, sawblades, bolt cutters, night vision devices and grenade launchers.

By 4 p.m., at least 60 officers from the various composite forces arrived at the encampment with roughly 30 police vehicles and armored vans parked outside SSB and SSA, when roughly 200 students were present at the encampment. Law enforcement told protesters to leave the encampment or face arrest. Eleven protesters linked arms

and sat in the center of the encampment, where they were arrested. Law enforcement then began tearing down the encampment and blockading the entrances to Chess Plaza. Water, food and other supplies were confiscated and relocated using facility vehicles. Around 5 p.m, snipers were spotted on top of SSA.

By 5:40 p.m., a vehicle-mounted tear gas launcher accompanied by 16 officers with grenade launchers moved toward the destroyed encampment and ongoing protest. By 5:42 p.m., demonstrators began marching away from the officers and toward the Plinth, where nearly 200 protesters continued demonstrating throughout the evening. By 5:47 p.m., law enforcement vacated Chess Plaza after removing the last piece of the encampment. Protesters demonstrated at the Plinth until roughly 6:45 p.m. before moving to demonstrate at the Collin County Jail at 7:00 p.m.

From 4 to 5 p.m., approximately seven counter-protesters holding Israeli flags gathered on the outskirts of the demonstration. The counter-protesters declined to comment.

Arrested faculty include Associate History Professor Ben Wright, Assistant History Professor Rosemary Admiral and Assistant Art History Professor Ali Asgar Alibhai. Arrested students include SJP President Mousa Najjar and SJP Secretary Nour Saad alongside seven other students. *The Mercury* has contacted the Bass School for comment regarding the faculty arrests; as of publication Dean Nils Roemer has not responded. The arrested protesters were taken to Collin County Jail.

At 7:00 p.m. UTD staff played a pre-recorded announcement in the Student Union announcing it would be closed early and requesting that students leave the premises by 8:00 p.m. On Wednesday, the SU usually closes at midnight. At the time of publication, Student Union Director Dan Goodwin has not provided a statement. On May 2, the Administration Building was closed to students and the public.

Top: Protesters refusing to leave the encampment. Bottom: Law enforcement including state troopers, UTDPD and Collin County PD arresting UTD professor Ali Alibhai while encampment attendees film the encounter.

PHOTOS BY SURJADITYA SARKAR | MERCURY STAFF

Collin County Jail releases detainees, families rejoice

Law enforcement released all protesters nearly 24 hours after state troopers and local forces raided UTD's pro-Palestine encampment

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RAINIER PEDERSON
Mercury Staff

Originally published May 3.

As of 4:30 p.m. May 2, all 21 individuals arrested and detained at Collin County Jail after Texas law enforcement's May 1 raid of UTD's "Gaza Liberation Plaza" encampment were released.

The arraignment process began around 9:30 a.m. May 2 and the first detainee — Associate Art History Professor Ali Asgar Alibhai — was released at 11:40 a.m., with the second detainee following seven minutes later. After the first two releases, Collin County Jail took over two hours to release any more detainees. One family member per arrested individual was allowed into the jail lobby starting 9:15 a.m. for the arraignment proceedings. Police stopped camerapeople from local news outlets from entering the lobby of the County Jail to livestream the arraignment.

Marwa Elbially, a volunteer attorney present at the jail demonstration and unaffiliated with the lawyers representing the 21 arrested protesters, said that arrests for misdemeanors are usually handled through attorney appearance bonds, which would have released the protesters a few hours after their arrest. However, Elbially said a standing order from Collin County Magistrate Lisa Bronchetti prevented attorneys from filing appearance bonds for Class B Criminal Trespass, the charge levied against the 21 arrested individuals. Without the appearance bond, releasing those arrested is mandatory only after arraignment, which must occur within 24 hours of arrest.

"All these kids have clean records, yet [they are charged with] a Class B misdemeanor," Elbially said. "[Bronchetti] has no basis to hold them, to refuse bonds."

State and local police forces raided the encampment at 4 p.m. May 1, less than 12 hours after Students for Justice in Palestine members constructed it in the Chess Plaza. Police tore through the encampment's walls and officers demanded protesters to leave or face arrest. Those arrested included three UTD professors, nine confirmed students, one UTD alum and eight community members. Concerned Comets, families of the detained and local activists started protesting

at Collin County Jail at 7 p.m. May 1 and continued throughout the night. Protesters sang, chanted, drew with chalk and prayed while waiting for the detainees' release. By 9 a.m. May 2, roughly 50 protesters remained from May 1's initial crowd of 150.

Alibhai said law enforcement shackled the hands, feet and waists of arrested protesters before transporting them to jail in police vans. When the detainees arrived at the jail facility, Alibhai said they saw officers with large weaponry such as flexible baton rounds and grenade launchers equipped with tear gas.

"[The officers] were all ... intimidating them [college-age detainees] when we got here, right when we were put in holding," Alibhai said. "I will say that not all of the staff that was here at Collin County was horrific. In fact, most of the people were actually very sweet, very nice to let our students pray. They even asked our students if they needed hijabs ... They were very kind to us."

While held at the facility, Alibhai said he and other encampment detainees bonded with the other inmates. While awaiting release, Alibhai and detainees shared stories and information about how they were detained and the backdrop

of their arrests with their fellow inmates, particularly making connections over the injustice, which had brought many innocents to the jail.

"We did not feel danger from any of the inmates," Alibhai said. "We actually only felt love and compassion even though people are stripped from everything like their freedom, we saw glimpses of beautiful humanity. And that's the same thing I saw at the

encampment from the outside."

Demonstrators waiting outside the jail welcomed each detainee's release with loud cheers. Community leaders led demonstrators in shouting the takbir — a celebratory Islamic call and response — while detainees' family members, who waited near the jail's lobby doors since the arraignment began, rushed to embrace their loved ones. Throughout the morning, chant leaders updated demonstrators on the arraignment's progress and assured waiting families that demonstration organizers had enough money to pay every arrested individual's bond. The demonstration dispersed after the final detainee was released.

UTD President Richard Benson released a statement over four hours after law enforcement started dismantling the encampment May 1. In his statement, Benson said UTD is a "strong advocate for the constitutional right to free speech," and that arrests were made because the encampment disrupted foot traffic near Chess Plaza. *The Mercury* has reached out to the Office of the President for further details and has not received a response as of publication.



ANIKA SULTANA | MERCURY STAFF

After a night of protesting, approximately 50 demonstrators remained outside Collin County Jail as detainees were released.

ment May 1. In his statement, Benson said UTD is a "strong advocate for the constitutional right to free speech," and that arrests were made because the encampment disrupted foot traffic near Chess Plaza. *The Mercury* has reached out to the Office of the President for further details and has not received a response as of publication.

Concerned UTD faculty created a petition May 3 demanding university leadership drop legal charges against everyone arrested at the encampment, ensure student activists are not punished and affirm detained faculty will face no professional repercussions. The petition is available for all faculty members to co-sign. As of 12:00 p.m. May 10, 109 faculty members have signed the petition. Ravi Prakash, speaker of the Academic Senate, said Benson blocked him from emailing faculty about the encampment, arrests and petition. Over 1,300 UTD alumni signed a similar petition calling for charges to be dropped against the arrested. The Academic Senate officially passed a motion on May 10 expressing the petition's sentiment.

The same day, Student Government released a letter condemning police violence against protesters, expressing solidarity with those arrested and reaffirming its demand for UTD to support a permanent cease-fire in Gaza. SG President Devin Schwartz, Vice President Debopreetta Bhattacharya, the

current Executive Committee and over nine different former presidents and vice presidents signed the letter.

The Islamic Association of North Texas also published a letter May 3 demanding city leaders and institutions — including Richardson PD, Allen PD and the Collin County Magistrate — justify their use of force and prove that detainees were treated humanely and fairly. Twenty-seven other businesses and community and religious organiza-

tions co-signed the letter.

"The horrible thing is that I don't believe that any of this had to happen, right?" Alibhai said. "Like our students protesting, why would you have people in military uniform and with military equipment intimidate and come to hit the children? That was the final straw for me. I told my colleagues that I am here and that I will always protect my students like I did. I have no regrets, if I had to do this for my students again, then I would."



ANIKA SULTANA | MERCURY STAFF

A protester at Collin County Jail raises a sign which reads "Profs, you make us proud."

Comets, community protest overnight at Collin County Jail

As detainees waited for their morning arraignment, demonstrators protested outside of Collin County Jail throughout the night

GREGORIO OLIVARES GUTIERREZ
Editor-in-Chief

MARIA SHAIKH
Managing Editor

Originally published May 2.

Nine students, three professors, one alum and eight community members were arrested after state troopers and

local police stormed UTD's "Gaza Liberation Plaza" protest encampment at 4 p.m. May 1. Officers transported the detainees to Collin County Jail, where they will remain at least until May 2.

Protests demanding the release of the 21 individuals began at 7 p.m. outside the county jail. By 9 p.m., over 150 demonstrators from UTD and the lo-

cal community arrived on jail property. Nesren Abdelaziz, mother of one of the arrested students, said she and her family arrived at the county jail at 7 p.m. and began demonstrations alongside other protesters, including songs, chants and prayers inside the lobby before police moved them out of the building. Officers kept the lobby entrances locked for the protest's remainder, only opening them for attorneys or police to enter or leave.

"My 18-year-old son got arrested on UTD campus, he was literally not even part of the encampment, just walking on the sidewalk," Abdelaziz said. "I have been here since the beginning. We waited around in the lobby a little bit before they kicked us out ... My little girls tried to use the restroom, but the officers would not let them use the restrooms. Injustice all around us here."

Abdelaziz said protests supporting Palestine and those jailed for their pro-Palestine activism are particularly important to her and her family because she and her husband are Palestinian. Abdelaziz said she is always devastated by the "apartheid" conditions she experiences when she visits Palestine, particularly because of the differences in how she and her husband are treated because he holds a Palestinian passport while she holds a U.S. passport.

"We are proud of you and you are doing this for a great cause," Abdelaziz said, addressing the jailed students and professors. "Hold your head up, we have got your back."

After the protesters were sent outside of the building, they began covering the cement barricades and the walkway to the jail lobby with chalk drawings supporting the arrested individuals and calling for the liberation of Palestine. At 9:30 p.m., protesters gathered around the entrance to the county jail

lobby to pray Isha, the final obligatory prayer of the day in Islam. After Isha, volunteer organizers and UTD SJP members led the crowd in a series of chants.

The crowd included not only UTD students and families of the arrested, but local community activists who had heard about the encampment and its removal. Leslie Cunningham, a retired member of the Texas State Employees Union, arrived to support the students and staff arrested after learning of the arrests through Signal.

"The people arrested are very brave," Cunningham said. "It is wonderful that they are passionate enough to feel and to believe that this cause is so important that they are willing to get arrested to further the fight. Palestine needs to be free."

Cunningham said the current protests across the nation are reminiscent of her time in university during the 1960s, where she protested as part of the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements.

"I am here because I care very much about the liberation of Palestine," Cunningham said. "I have had many Jewish friends who have joined Jewish Voice for Peace, but many others still want to believe that Israel is wonderful. But it is all a packet of lies that has been served for decades."

At 10 p.m., a group of volunteer attorneys who had spoken to the arrested students and filed bail requests for all 21 arrested individuals made an an-

nouncement to the gathered protesters.

"You guys being here made a difference tonight," one volunteer attorney said. "We have met with 18 of the 21 people arrested already, and your pressure has enabled us to see the students who were arrested way quicker than we normally would have. Unfortunately, they are not going to let them out tonight."

The attorneys said the presiding Collin County Magistrate, Lisa Bronchetti, had barred individuals charged with criminal trespassing from being released on an attorney appearance bond. All 21 arrested individuals have been charged with a Class B Criminal Trespass misdemeanor and must pay a \$350 fine each to be released, which the attorneys have already prepared. The potential release of the 21 individuals will

come after their arraignment May 2. The attorneys said each detained individual is allowed a maximum of two family members present during their court hearing, though the public may not attend. The attorneys emphasized that everything was prepared to bond out all the arrested individuals; however, because of Bronchetti's order, proceedings could not continue until the morning.

"It is important for the families to show up and for you guys to show up," volunteer attorney Marwa Elbially said. "Show them that we are a strong community, we believe in the freedom of Palestine."



PHOTOS BY ALEXANDER LAWLESS | MERCURY STAFF

Protesters gathered outside the Collin County Jail on May 1 at 7 p.m. Protests would continue through the night and into May 2 when the final detainee was released.

‘They are just kids!’

Art history professor Ali Alibhai speaks on his violent May 1 arrest after standing between student protesters and police

GREGORIO OLIVARES GUTIERREZ
Editor-in-Chief

Assistant Professor of Art History Ali Alibhai rushed to protect student protesters from what he saw as a militarized police force armed with weapons and willing to harm the protesters gathered at the encampment on May 1. His efforts to de-escalate and protect students were quickly quashed as police attacked, arrested and later chained him.

Alibhai’s first and last interaction with the encampment was at 4:00 p.m. After finishing up the final day of his graduate art history class at 3:54 p.m., Alibhai exited the ATEC building and was soon surrounded by the chants of students as he walked around the Chess Plaza. Alibhai said he heard demonstrators start chanting, “There is no riot here! Why are you in riot gear?” The sounds from law enforcement — the banging of batons against shields, the whirring of a helicopter and the thudding of heavy boots — overwhelmed him as he noticed a sea of heavily-armed officers marching toward the students. The attire of law enforcement reminded Alibhai of fascist soldiers during World War II.

“When you are a professor, you become very protective of your students,” Alibhai said. “I want my students to succeed; I certainly don’t want them to get shot on campus, and this was the idea that was going through my head. These officers are ready for violence — they were dressed up in their black and brown shirts, and it looked like a scene from the 1940s brought to campus.”

Alibhai stood adjacent to the SSB between the student protesters and the encroaching law enforcement. Five officers immediately piled onto Alibhai as a wall of police separated him from the crowd. The last thing he saw, as officers assaulted

him and attempted to flip him onto the ground, was his phone screensaver, which was a photo of his daughter. A police officer hit Fox 4 reporter Blake Hanson’s camera with bolt cutters as Hanson filmed Alibhai’s arrest. Alibhai, like others arrested at the encampment, was publicly chained and escorted into a police van, where detainees spent over 30 minutes in the hot unventilated vehicle. Detainees would not be told on what ground they were arrested until they arrived at Collin County Jail, approximately two hours after the initial arrest.

“I thought to myself that I need to get between the soldiers and the students to try and deescalate this,” Alibhai said. “But they kept on coming towards me. It was just me in the center and I remember yelling:

‘They’re just kids! They’re just kids! What are you doing! They’re kids! You can’t do this!’”

Alibhai said that at Collin County Jail, the detainees were treated wildly differently based on which law enforcement officer they interacted with and that the facility was designed to be inhospitable. Alibhai said the only clock visible to detainees was broken, bathroom use was restricted and urine covered the floors and detainees were kept dehydrated throughout the entire booking process. Some officers showed compassion, Alibhai said, one female officer offered head coverings to female Muslim detainees whose hijabs were removed upon arrest. While being checked into jail, all 21 detainees had to provide personal information like their gender, race and religion.

“The funny thing is that in the official records they gave us afterwards, we were all identified as Middle Eastern despite what we had filled out earlier,” Alibhai said. “Since I come from a South Asian background, I had ticked Asian on the form, so the misidentification was a surprise.”

Alibhai said that if he is able to continue working at UTD, he would like to start a program where humanities professors go to local jails and prisons and give lectures on their fields of expertise. Alibhai said that students shouldn’t let the violence of May 1 overshadow their voices when they speak up for the people of Palestine.

“None of this would have happened if they hadn’t militarized our campus,” Alibhai said. “Our students are peaceful, and they have been peacefully protesting for the last seven months ... Students live in a world where everything is at your fingertips, and every day you see the tragic images, day in and out, coming out of Gaza. What is more disruptive to a campus, a couple of tents, water and reading and study sessions, or the violent university response to it?”



ANIKHA SULTANA | MERCURY STAFF

At 11:40 a.m. Ali Alibhai was the first of the 21 detained individuals to be released from Collin County Jail. Exiting the detention facility, Alibhai is accompanied by his wife and mother, who waited outside the jail for hours before his release.

Male and female detainees were separated after checking in. Alibhai said the male detainees bonded with other inmates and engaged in academic and interpersonal conversations with many of the other inmates. One inmate in particular stood out to Alibhai: a former University of North Texas anthropology student who studied the Mandé people of West Africa. In the Summer of 2020 Alibhai taught AHST 6321: Africa and the Frontiers of Islam and Byzantium, which went into depth about the Mandé people, and he and the inmate were able to bond over this academic subject. Alibhai said he and the students encouraged the inmate to reconnect with his interest in anthropology because of how passionate he was, offering to help him with his goal once they were released. The inmate spoke about his experiences being stuck in the U.S. prison system for minor

drug offenses, and how the prison system is designed to keep people trapped inside of it so prisons can profit.

“A student came up to me while we were jailed and said, ‘Isn’t it wonderful being here and getting to bond with everyone here? You are in a place where you are stripped of every human dignity, and yet you still find the most beautiful parts of humanity here,’” Alibhai said. “And I thought that was the lesson of the night. The students were funny and kept all of the inmates positive while sharing their academic interests with everyone.”

Alibhai said that experiencing jail firsthand and speaking to other inmates who have repeatedly been through the prison system emphasized how unequally justice is served in the U.S. Alibhai has not received a clear message from administration regarding May 1 as of the publication

of this article. Alibhai said that if he is able to continue working at UTD, he would like to start a program where humanities professors go to local jails and prisons and give lectures on their fields of expertise. Alibhai said that students shouldn’t let the violence of May 1 overshadow their voices when they speak up for the people of Palestine.

“None of this would have happened if they hadn’t militarized our campus,” Alibhai said. “Our students are peaceful, and they have been peacefully protesting for the last seven months ... Students live in a world where everything is at your fingertips, and every day you see the tragic images, day in and out, coming out of Gaza. What is more disruptive to a campus, a couple of tents, water and reading and study sessions, or the violent university response to it?”

UTD professor reflects on arrest, experiences of ‘UTD 21’

History professor Ben Wright was arrested and jailed during the "Gaza Liberation Plaza" encampment raid alongside 20 others

GREGORIO OLIVARES GUTIERREZ
Editor-in-Chief

While attempting to reduce the tension between encroaching police and student protesters, UTD history professor Ben Wright was arrested alongside two other colleagues on May 1 at the “Gaza Liberation Plaza” encampment.

Wright spent over 20 hours in Collin County Jail alongside the rest of “the UTD 21” — the 20 other professors, students and community members detained during the raid on the “Gaza Liberation Plaza.” A professor of early U.S. history, Wright visited the student encampment three times to bring the protesters reading materials about past student protests and civil disobedience, among other topics, as part of a “teach-in” during the encampment. Wright told students that protesting would not be a simple affair because there will always be resistance to change, but that doesn’t mean they should forsake their morals.

“I was struck by the kind of order and dogged commitment to peaceful protest and the conscientiousness which went into ... [keeping] lanes open for students to travel,” Wright said. “There was a conversation about if the Fire Marshal does come and talk to them, what kind of approach they will take to moving the encampment to comply with safety concerns. So my first impression when I got there was how pervasive that sense of calm responsibility was.”

Wright said he rushed to UTD on May 1 as soon as he heard about the encampment because he felt worried about how administration would react to the protesting students, especially with how peaceful protests have historically been met with violence in the U.S. However, when he arrived, Wright said he found a wonderfully organized and peaceful gathering of students who had supplied food and water for the encampment, created teams of legal observers, set up a medical tent and issued clear guidelines for participation in the encampment. The encampment rules prohibited any form of bigotry within the encampment, mandated that participants respect the space they occupied and each

other, banned vandalism and banned speaking with counter-protesters to avoid confrontations. Wright said he was concerned about the potential delay the encampment would create for students, so he and a colleague timed themselves taking detours around Chess Plaza. The encampment added less than 30 seconds to their respective walk times.

“The protest was not the product of outsiders,” Wright said. “It was the work

of some of our brightest and most committed students.”

Between faculty meetings, writing a book review, stopping by the encampment to drop off books and grading papers, Wright said he had a fairly normal day until he began receiving concerned messages from students around 3:30 p.m. saying that state troopers had arrived on campus. Wright made his way to Chess Plaza and around 3:45 p.m., he heard

student leaders reading the notice UTD administration had sent them that mandated the encampment be immediately dismantled. Fifteen minutes later, state troopers arrived at Chess Plaza and Wright stood between them and the students.

“At a minimum, I understood myself as engaging in peaceful protest against an absurd, dangerous overreaction, but I still hoped for de-escalation,” Wright said.

Wright said that after the notice had been read, police gave the protesters no other orders. Coordinated waves of officers pushed into the encampment in rapid succession and quickly arrested students, faculty and community members.

“We saw these officers lining up in what looked like military formations, and I looked back and I saw the eyes of students — who were young, who were scared, who were confused, who were looking for a sense of guidance or clarity from campus administrators,” Wright said. “But the officers were not there ... to do anything other than to arrest people and to destroy.”

Standing in between the officers and students made Wright one of the first to be arrested. Wright said the officers chained his wrists, waist and legs, and he was thrown into one of the hot transport vans alongside arrested students and UTD professor Ali Alibhai. Beyond the physical violence of the arrests, Wright said officers at Collin County Jail continued the abuse verbally, through what he perceived as veiled threats and through open intimidation.

“When we arrived at the Collin County Jail, we were marched out one by one with machine guns pointed at us, and we were told to stand up against the wall and not to move,” Wright said. “It was incredibly intense. It is crazy how quickly your sense of self and experience changes when you have men with guns screaming and dehumanizing you.”

Wright said the students were spectacu-

lar throughout their detainment — they immediately began talking to one another and Wright about their academic interests and passions, and emphasized how the repression they had faced on campus was miniscule compared to what the people of Gaza go through every day. At the jail itself, Wright said students bonded with other inmates and learned from them about the U.S. prison system; in exchange, students gave inmates reading recommendations and encouraged them to pursue their academic interests despite the hurdles they had faced.

“UTD is seen as a nerdy school, and I think for one night, we made Collin County Jail nerdy,” Wright said.

Wright was released May 2 on a personal recognizance bond at no cost; as part of the terms of his release, Wright was taken aback by the prejudice the

judge overseeing arraignment demonstrated toward students and faculty: some inmates were let out for free while others had to pay \$3,000 despite being arrested under similar circumstances. Wright is prohibited from coming to campus for anything beyond teaching or work-related duties. Wright said he finds parallels between the reactions to current student protests and those which occurred during the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements.

“When we look at these student protests in hindsight, they receive celebration and elicit nostalgia, but when they are happening in real time they receive this condemnation, dismissal and fear,” Wright said. “I have a feeling that 50 years from now, people will be remembering the UTD 21. What now is something the administration is ashamed of will be something it talks about with pride in the future.”



SURJADITYA SARKAR | MERCURY STAFF

Law enforcement shackle UTD professor Ben Wright shortly after he was arrested May 1. All 21 arrested individuals were chained as well as handcuffed.

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

UTD administration restricts students' freedom of speech using vague prescriptive statements, creating unsafe climate

GREGORIO OLIVARES GUTIERREZ
Editor-in-Chief

UTD administration had 21 students, staff, alumni and community members arrested, but not once has the administration pointed to a specific part of UTD or UT System policy that the arrested individuals violated. Administration has fundamentally failed to listen to its students and has instead established a grossly restrictive and prescriptive policy.

The UTD Office of Communications and Office of the President have rebuffed every attempt *The Mercury* has made to contact them. Instead of properly addressing their students, President Richard Benson has written an op-ed for *The Dallas Morning News*, where he justifies the violent arrests and detainments conducted by UTDPD and four other law enforcement agencies by saying that “[UTD is] protecting the right of free speech and the safety of our community.” Three professors stood between the encroaching police and the students in the encampment, and all three professors found themselves behind the cell bars of the Collin County Jail because they dared to stand up for UTD students’ safety and right to protest, while no member of the campus administration made an attempt to de-escalate the situation. While students and faculty were shackled on-campus, UTD President Richard Benson chose to ignore the encampment and visit billionaire Harlan Crow, an esteemed benefactor of Justice Clarence Thomas and a casual collector of Nazi memorabilia.

Rafael Martín, UTD vice president and chief of staff, came to the encampment in person around 6 a.m. and told the demonstrators to leave, and administration issued a written notice to dismantle the encampment, which protest leaders read aloud around 3:45 p.m. — 15 minutes before the law enforcement raid began, hardly enough time for students to comply. Other than these two contacts, neither of which left official or accessible written records, administration did not successfully communicate with students. It is unacceptable how vague and unresponsive administrators have been during what is easily one of the most historically significant

moments in campus history. The worst thing about the notice is its vague language, especially when defining what campus policy would warrant such an exaggerated show of force from law enforcement in response to peaceful students. The message from administration to protesters began with, “The setting up of an encampment including tents, barricades and other structures is not permitted under the university’s policy for speech, expression, and assembly, nor is it permitted under any other University of Texas at Dallas or UT System policy or rule.” The question students were asking themselves in the 15 minutes after this message was delivered and before police began arresting demonstrators and tearing down the encampment was: what does this notice even mean? The notice ends with a threat of arrest if the students do not leave, but the opening section begins by making vague allusions to a policy that says setting up an encampment “is not permitted.”

There are two common ways to interpret the phrase “is not permitted”: firstly, that the policy explicitly says that something is not allowed; secondly, that the policy does not explicitly say that something is allowed. These

Unarmed students peacefully protesting for an end to genocide and war should never be met with such grotesque violence.

two interpretations make the policy either restrictive or prescriptive. UTDSP 5001 serves as the campus policy on all matters of speech, expression and assembly; this is presumably what administration referred to in their notice, since it was the main policy point discussed by faculty during the May 10 Academic Senate meeting about the encampment’s legality. However, as of



RAINIER PEDERSON | MERCURY STAFF

publication, neither Benson nor any other administrators have responded to *The Mercury’s* requests to confirm this information. At no point in the 12 sections of UTD’s policy is there a clause which prohibits creating encampments on campus. The encampment at Chess Plaza is a collection of tents, tables, wood and tires, all of which have previously been used when campus-affiliated fraternities and sororities hold fundraisers or Red Bull sets up an advertising display in the very same location. There are indeed rules against creating obstructions to pedestrians, but students were allowed to move through the encampment before the police raid. Those that did not want to enter it could travel a few feet north to the next accessible sidewalk crossing between the magnolia trees with a detour time around 30 seconds. The signs and slogans present at the encampment all fall under the protections in Section B: Subsection 6 — Harassment, which says that “to make an argument for or against the substance of any political, religious, philosophical, ideological, or academic idea is not harassment, even if some listeners are offended by the ar-

gument or idea.” The encampment undoubtedly falls under the category of a political argument; its entire purpose was to show solidarity with the people of Gaza and demand UTD divest from weapons manufacturers that contribute to the genocide of Palestinians.

Twenty-one students, faculty, alumni and community members were arrested because they either tried to protect students from the violence of state law enforcement or because they were willing to sacrifice themselves for their political beliefs. UTD arrested them and disbanded the encampment without providing adequate reasoning. The issue with administration’s prescriptive form of policy interpretation lies in its vagueness: because the “Gaza Liberation Plaza” was not explicitly permitted within the policy, the demonstration is pushed into this policy gray area, which allows the Office of the President to disband any protests or events which it sees as inconvenient. The policy must distinguish between clear guidelines and prohibitions; it should not become a nebulous cudgel that beats students into submission. Campus administration must explic-

itly point out what specific sections of campus or UT System policy were violated and how those violations translate into requiring heavily-armed law enforcement officers violently disperse a group which Benson has admitted was weaponless and nonviolent. Unarmed students peacefully protesting for an end to genocide and war should never be met with such grotesque violence, yet UTD administration, like that of UT Austin, has fallen prey to an insidious, rabid lust for violence against protesters.

The Comet community must call for more transparency from campus administrators by creating petitions, emailing them and continuing to protest about what matters for them while also demanding that administrators release comprehensive details about who led the response against peaceful students, what specific rules they violated and why such extreme action was taken.

Solidarity: letters in response to May 1 encampment arrests

Alumni, faculty, community members condemn police violence at encampment, demand administration drop legal charges

Disclaimer: These letters have been lightly edited for concision. Read the original letters and view all signatories at utdmercury.com.

UTD FACULTY
Courtesy

Published May 6.
To the President, Provost, Deans, and other leadership of UT Dallas:
We write as Comet faculty proudly committed to the University’s stated mission of “graduating well-rounded citizens whose education has prepared them for rewarding lives and productive careers in a constantly changing world.” The students, alumni, and community members who recently formed the “Gaza Liberation” encampment on our

campus were exercising the responsibilities of political voice and conscience that demonstrate their readiness to be valuable citizens in our tumultuous world. We the undersigned members of the UT Dallas faculty interpret the use of police force to break up the encampment, and the arrests of students, community members, and faculty who were attempting to protect our students and their exercise of free expression, as a violation of the University’s mission and core values.
The Gaza Liberation encampment

was a heartening example of peaceful political demonstration, while simultaneously developing into a site of communal gathering, mutual education, and creative as well as critical expression. Although we are deeply troubled by the university’s turn to police force on May 1st, we hope that our university leadership reorients its response to the encampment to be peaceful and productive.
Specifically, we call for the university leadership to:
Drop or refrain from pressing legal

charges against all individuals
Allow student activists to complete their semesters’ coursework, without suspension, expulsion, or other punishment this semester, and without restricting their future options to enroll in classes or live in university housing
Affirm that faculty who were detained will face no professional repercussions.
Conversely, we would strenuously object to the suspension, expulsion, or other punishment of students participating in the encampment. We would likewise oppose any further use of force,

should students attempt to reestablish an encampment or similar demonstration.
UT Dallas has the opportunity during this historic moment in higher education to be an exemplar. We hope it embraces this chance with the institution’s characteristic courage, innovativeness, and conscience.
Sincerely,
The undersigned UTD faculty
Over 100 signatures



ALEXANDER LAWLESS | MERCURY STAFF

UTD ALUMNI
Courtesy

Published May 6.
To the President, Provost, Deans, and other leadership of UT Dallas:
To the President, Provost, Deans, and other leadership of UT Dallas:
We, the undersigned alumni, write as a diverse group of Comets that are proud to call the University of Texas at Dallas our alma mater. We strongly condemn the recent violent retaliation against the students, alumni, faculty, staff, and community members holding peaceful protests at the Gaza Liberation encampment. The use of force is a violation of the University’s mission and our nation’s values of free speech and expression.
As alumni, we know that the University plays a critical role in preparing and educating students for the world they are inheriting. The Gaza Liberation encampment was a true example of what peaceful student organizing, mutual education, and critical reflexivity can look like. To see the University respond with fear tactics and excessive force to break up an otherwise peaceful political demonstration truly disappoints us.
We join the faculty in calling for university leadership to:
Drop or refrain from pressing legal charges against all individuals;
Allow student activists to complete their

semesters’ coursework, without suspension, expulsion, or other punishment this semester, and without restricting their future options to enroll in classes or live in university housing;
Affirm that faculty who were detained will face no professional repercussions.
In addition, we join the student activists’ calls for:
UTD and UTIMCO to fully divest from corporations complicit and directly facilitating war, occupation, policing, militarism, and death in Palestine and around the world;
UTD to reject the anti-Palestinian Executive Order and threats against SJP’s freedom of speech;
UTD to end the silence and release a public statement calling for an immediate, permanent ceasefire in Gaza and denounce the ongoing genocidal campaign against the Palestinian people.
Until these demands are met, we will withhold any financial donations to the University.
UT Dallas has the opportunity during this historic moment to be a leader that encourages peaceful political discourse and divests from war profiteering. We hope it embraces this chance.
Sincerely,
The undersigned UTD alumni
Over 1,300 signatures



GRAPHICS BY ERIN GUTSCHKE | MERCURY STAFF

State troopers slammed our own students and faculty into the ground, aiming to destroy not just their encampment but their spirit. The administration's response to the "Gaza Liberation Plaza" on May 1 normalizes military-grade violence against student expression, leaving a bloody specter over all future student protests and expressions on UTD's campus.



Students arrested, administration well-rested

Students sat in circles at Chess Plaza, studying and eating food brought by volunteers. They talked about poetry and politics with faculty that joined the encampment in solidarity and provided reading materials. A community library was available to anyone who wanted to learn about social and political issues, with particular emphasis on Palestinian literature. Protesters called for UTD to divest from Israel and for the liberation of Palestine.

The atmosphere of the encampment was amicable, academic and peaceful. Students were not a threat to campus safety. UTD administration had no reason to deploy state troopers, police drones, assault rifles, snipers or grenade launchers.

A total of 21 people were arrested, including three faculty, one alum and nine students. Law enforcement's approach to the arrests was excessive. Instead of a typical arrest through handcuffing wrists, officers bound the arrested at the waist and ankles as well as their wrists. These arrests were indiscriminate, including not only encampment protesters but those standing between the police and the encampment — including Assistant Professor of Art History Ali Alibhai, who was not attending the protest but had rushed to stand up for students by asking why officers were present with excessive force. Did Alibhai deserve to be kicked and knocked to the ground before being tossed into a hot car for half an hour? Is this a testament to how much UTD's administration cares about its faculty?

A group of protesters tried to stand their ground by locking arms and sitting in a circle inside the encampment as they watched officers tear it apart. No protesters tried to pick a fight with an officer; instead, they verbally co-

ordinated with each other to move out of the way of police as they forced their way through Chess Plaza and the surrounding area. Even after their encampment was destroyed and as they sat overnight at Collin County Jail, protesters continued to be peaceful.



NONSENSE NOTICE To: Protestors From: Administration

Protesters read a letter from UTD around 3:45 p.m. that cited a vague violation of university policy. Fifteen minutes after the notice was read, officers moved in to destroy the encampment — giving students no time to evacuate or react. The letter fundamentally failed to clarify what rules had been broken, with the only takeaway for students being that administration would have them arrested for criminal trespass if they did not remove the encampment immediately.

Administration has made it clear they believe students and faculty deserve such treatment. UTD President Richard Benson said in his op-ed for *The Dallas Morning News* that "[the encampment] was a well-planned, intentionally provocative operation." Instead of honoring students' right to protest, he assumed the worst of the protesters despite having no evidence of any risk they posed, and the militarized response he authorized treated students and staff as subhuman.

UTD knew about the encampment since at least 6 a.m. when Vice President and Chief of Staff Rafael Martín told protesters to disband — verbally, not in writing. Communications were scant for the rest of the day. Instead of attempting to de-escalate the situation, Benson let protesters face brutality at the hands of law enforcement while he had a clandestine rendezvous with Harlan Crow, renowned for his room dedicated to Nazi memorabilia. Administration did not communicate with students again until around 3 p.m. when the written notice was sent. Several hours had passed between communications, and a lack of hard details was a constant between both encounters. Benson and other members of administration have a responsibility to their faculty and students to issue several clear, accessible warn-

ings and attempt actual dialogues with their students and faculty before even thinking of using police force.

UT System Board Chairman Kevin Eltife said the UT System made the decision to bring in outside law enforcement, like the state troopers, to destroy the encampment. Eltife feels no remorse for his decision to use excessive police force on a peaceful protest. In an interview with *The Dallas Morning News*, Eltife said he "applauded" state troopers' dismantling of the encampment and that "we will do it again if needed."

The UT System does not have a specific policy in place barring students from creating an encampment. The written notice read aloud at UTD's encampment intentionally did not state which policies were violated so that Benson and the UT System could abuse their power by facilitating police violence against its own students. The notice's vagueness calls into question how — or even if — students can safely protest on campus again when such a threat of force now looms over them. The truth is, administration does not care about its own policies. The intensity of calling in state troopers to a peaceful protest completely goes against UTD's Speech, Expression, and Assembly policy, UTDSP5001, in subsection 48, where it reads, "It is the responsibility of the University to make its best effort to protect the safety of all persons on campus and to provide police protection for speakers, public assemblies, persons staffing or viewing exhibits, and other events."



Administration and their love affair with overcompliance

This isn't the first time Benson has harshly cracked down on student expression. As Israel increased the severity of its attacks against the Palestinian people after Oct. 7, students took to the Spirit Rocks to show support for Palestine or Israel. The Spirit Rocks, which were an integral facet of freedom of expression at UTD, were removed during Thanksgiving break. Again, there was no violence incited by the back-and-forth of students' support for Israel or Palestine. Despite paying lip service to students' civility, administration decided to remove one of the few things that brought

students together and gave UTD life — just because it didn't want to platform empathetic sentiments for Palestine.

After arrested students and faculty were released, their bond conditions severely restricted their presence on campus during the incredibly busy time of finals and graduation. Those arrested can only set foot on campus for "essential" activities, such as teaching or attending classes. Assistant History Professor Ben Wright, one of those arrested, said his colleague Rosemary Admiral was only permitted access to her office with a UTDPD escort, far beyond what her release conditions require. Benson established that the encampment was nonviolent, and no weapons were found in it or on the arrested individuals, so the constant overcompliance is unnecessary and only serves to intimidate students and faculty.

UTD has a history of overcompliance. A perfectly law-abiding office that existed under SB 17 for nearly the entire spring semester, OCRS, was dissolved because of fearmongering from Sen. Brandon Creighton — further proving that students are the first to be sacrificed when administration gets nervous. There are a plethora of available options when interacting with a peaceful encampment protest, and even if administrators disagreed with the optics or beliefs platformed by the encampment, calling in Texas DPS and multiple police departments to forcefully subdue students should never have been a viable option.



How to divest: a guide for administration

Eltife said to *The Dallas Morning News* that divesting from companies that support Israel militarily was not an option because he wants to continue maximizing UT Systems' investments, to ensure students have an affordable education. What Eltife fails to understand is there is no concrete indication that UTIMCO's \$1 million investment into Lockheed Martin, which amounts to only 0.02% of the total \$69.2 billion in UT System investments, improves the quality or affordability of student education. The amount of money invested across all five divestment target companies pales in front of the total funds overseen by

UTIMCO. UTD and the UT System divesting from the five corporations students protest against would be tantamount to a rounding error on an accounting sheet. And even if divestment would hurt UTD financially, it would still be necessary. The money of students pursuing an education in Texas is being funneled without our consent into weapons manufacturers that work tirelessly to end the educational prospects of countless children around the world, which is unconscionable.

Though the process of divestment is long — divestment from pro-apartheid companies in South Africa took roughly five years for many campuses — divestment, beyond just distancing academic institutions from oppression, is a statement of solidarity and a direct actionable goal campuses can take against apartheid regimes. When institutions such as Evergreen State College aim to divest from Israel, it is proof their administration cares about the concerns of students and is willing to amend university structures that don't align with their campus community's core values.

UTD administration, if your institutional goal is actually to be a "responsible global citizen that enthusiastically attends to our duty to create a sustainable environment," you would listen to the demands of an overwhelming majority of your community, which has spoken through protests, Student Government resolutions, petitions and more. You would refrain from weaponizing excessive force against your own students and faculty, or at the very least, apologize for and condemn your actions and begin the divestment process. Those who cared for their students would not try to enshrine a precedent of blind aggression against student expression, which contradicts the personal beliefs of administration.

The Mercury officially recognizes Israel's actions in the occupied territory of Palestine as a genocide in line with the interpretation put forth by humanitarian organizations like Amnesty International. *The Mercury* condemns UTD administration's hostility and militarized response to student protests and demands that they immediately begin the process of repairing their relationship with the campus community. Peaceful protesters calling for an end to genocide and apartheid should never have been met with such extreme violence.

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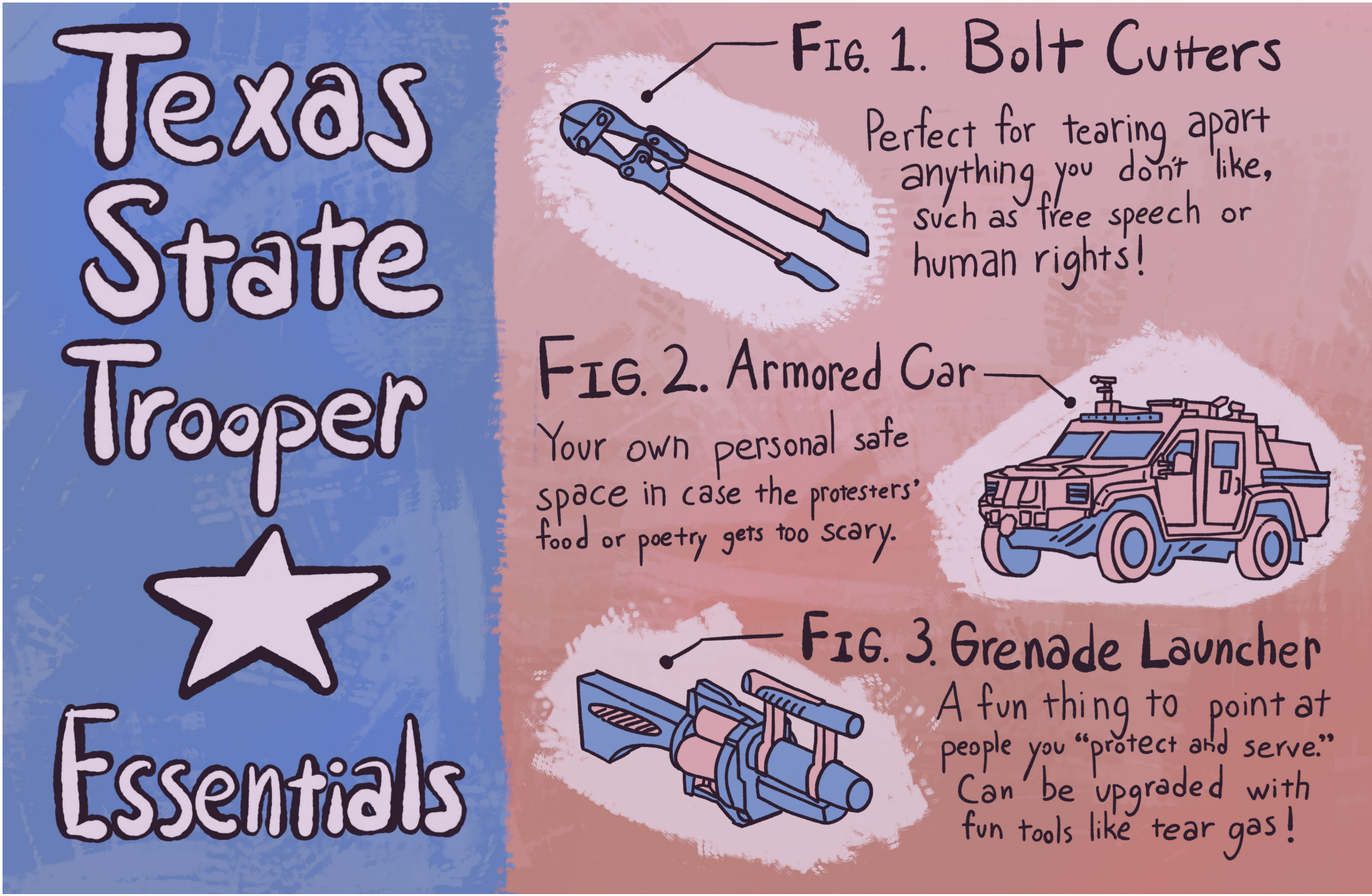
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